

FIRST Responders

As primary care physician, the internist helps a patient navigate health care needs

The internist is a great collector of people and their stories, and to the extent that no two people have the same story, each patient encounter is fresh and unique.

IS THERE A BEST TIME TO FIND AN INTERNIST?

The best time to find and choose an internist is when you're well, not when you're sick. When a patient is sick, he or she feels vulnerable and panicked and may not be as discriminating in finding a physician as the same patient might be when seeking out a physician for a well-care visit. The role of an internist is to act as both patient advocate and diagnostician. A solid doctor-patient relationship is the cornerstone of internal medicine.



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WHEN SHOULD A PARENT TRANSFER CARE OF A CHILD FROM A PEDIATRICIAN TO AN INTERNIST?

An internist is a physician who specializes in adult medicine. Typically young adults "age out" of their pediatrician's office by age 21 and, at that time, should make the transition to care by an internist.

WHAT ROLE DOES THE INTERNIST PLAY IN THE DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF MEDICAL ISSUES?

Internists often make the initial diagnosis of medical problems, interface with the patient and his or her family regarding the new medical problem, and in collaboration with the patient,

determine the next plan of care in the treatment process. It would seem optimal that the doctor-patient relationship be firmly established before such treatment crossroads arrive.

HOW DOES THE INTERNIST INTERFACE WITH SPECIALISTS WHEN TREATING A PATIENT?

Medical jargon is a language all its own and an internist acts as a translator of sorts, communicating not only directly to the patient, but to sub-specialists regarding the patient. For instance, if an internist diagnoses a medical condition that then requires the expertise of an OB-GYN or a cardiologist, it is often the role of internist, as patient advocate, to recommend the sub-specialist and communicate with the sub-specialist on behalf of the patient.

HOW OFTEN AND HOW EXTENSIVE SHOULD THE PHYSICAL BE FOR ADULTS?

It is generally recommended that adults have an annual physical exam inclusive of blood work and/or screening tests as determined by the patient's sex, age, family history and constellation of symptoms. No radiology test or blood work value as it stands alone can replace interpretation of the test in the context of a specific patient's case.

AS A PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN, HOW DOES AN INTERNIST HELP A PATIENT NAVIGATE HIS OR HER HEALTH CARE NEEDS?

I fashion the internist as "first-responder" – the one the patient reaches out to first for direction and assistance. Internists are presented with myriad patient problems ranging from psycho-emotional concerns to common medical problems, like hypertension, diabetes and weight management. ❖

"The internist is the first physician a patient reaches out to for direction and assistance."